

VZCZCXRO2422

OO RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHAA #0363/01 0840556

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 240556Z MAR 08

FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0464

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI PRIORITY 0269

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3526

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1344

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1211

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1780

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2335

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000363

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR P, E, SCA, EEB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/24/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: TAKING STOCK

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0295

[B](#). ASHGABAT 0223

[C](#). ASHGABAT 0219

[D](#). 07 ASHGABAT 0779

[E](#). 07 ASHGABAT 0778

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D)

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: Our new relationship with Turkmenistan is now over a year old, and it's time to take stock. After several score U.S. delegations, including a number of very high-level visits, we have a better view of the contour of the relationship and the personalities of the leaders. In general, Turkmenistan distrusts anything new. If it is comfortable with an initiative, it will cooperate; if not, it tends to respond with silence. Long isolated from the world and traumatized by former President Niyazov, the weak bureaucracy quakes at sending anything new up the line that the leader might not want to hear. Berdimuhamedov has reestablished his country's foreign relations, but he doesn't hesitate to caution, "We will follow our own path." At times, that path seems secretive and eccentric to us. Turkmenistan's relationship with Russia is paramount, but that's probably because Kremlin Inc./Gazprom supplies a significant part of Turkmenistan's GDP. Because the top leadership in Ashgabat fears being pushed around as it feels its way into the world, its insecurity sometimes incubates arrogant inscrutability that exasperates its Western partners. Turkmenistan matters strategically because of its long borders with Iran and Afghanistan. Turkmenistan matters because of its world-class energy resources and its potential to add to European energy security. The best way to build Berdimuhamedov's confidence would be for him to be received at high levels in the United States, sooner rather than later. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

[12.](#) (C) Following the death of Turkmenistan's former dictator Saparmurat Niyazov, the United States offered to "turn the

page" in the bilateral relationship and re-engage without pre-conditions. We told President Berdimuhamedov and Foreign Minister Meredov (increasingly Turkmenistan's Gray Cardinal) we were ready to cooperate to the extent they were willing to do so. In close consultation with the new leadership, we jointly identified five areas for further consultation and possible cooperation: political reform, economic reform, health and education, security, and energy. From Spring until the end of 2007, high-level U.S. delegations visited Ashgabat, some repeatedly, to explore enhancing cooperation. Also, in a first for Turkmenistan, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom visited in August 2007. Other especially high-level visits included former CENTCOM Commander Admiral Fallon, twice, and SFRC Ranking Minority Member Senator Lugar, whom the Turkmen universally praised as a living legend, an elder worthy of respect. In September 2007, President Berdimuhamedov and Secretary Rice met on the margins of UNGA in New York.

STEPS FORWARD

¶13. (C) Since Niyazov's death, Turkmenistan has definitely changed, and almost all the changes are for the better (refs B, C), even though the pace of change has been uneven and has not met all our expectations. On a day-to-day level, we have said we will go through doors that begin to open, but we will not try to kick open locked doors; and our pragmatic patience has led to some increasingly promising engagement, especially with the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights and with the Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting. Most recently, we have found Turkmenistani ministries and agencies finally prepared to begin cooperation on elements of economic and

ASHGABAT 00000363 002 OF 004

financial reform. Existing cooperation in people-to-people exchanges, Peace Corps, USAID assistance projects especially in health and agriculture, border security, humanitarian support for Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the Nevada National Guard partnership continue, although not always without occasional hitches.

STASIS

¶14. (C) To show concrete progress in the new relationship, by August 2007 Embassy Ashgabat had identified a number of outstanding bilateral issues that we thought could be solved, if both sides were willing to work together toward a normal, mature relationship: restarting the Surveillance Detection Program, registering the Ashgabat International School (AIS), re-opening the Turkmenbashi American Corner, and obtaining additional telephone lines for Embassy properties. To date, none has been resolved, although there recently was slight movement on telephone lines, and registering AIS is reportedly still in play. What we have seen is if Meredov doesn't want something, it doesn't happen. We have watched with curiosity as he has seemed to emerge as the de facto number two in the country. Without ever saying no, he has never responded to the Secretary's early 2007 invitation to visit Washington. Also, even though he himself first proposed it, he never responded to our proposed "12-Month Bilateral Work Plan" draft.

TRAUMA

¶15. (C) In reftels D and E, we analyzed the damage Niyazov's dictatorship did to the nation, but we have probably all along underestimated the profound psychological trauma his capricious evil and Turkmenistan's isolation caused the permanent bureaucracy that was decimated by the immigration of about 4,000 of Turkmenistan's best-educated citizens during the Niyazov era. All Central Asian states are top-down autocracies, but the problems that go along with that are only exacerbated in Turkmenistan by the number of bureaucrats -- albeit with a few bright and brave exceptions -- who are afraid to take any responsibility because of the

paralytic fear of passing up the chain anything that might possibly not be what the leader wants to hear.

WE'LL DO IT OUR WAY

¶6. (C) We judge that another factor is very important. As early as Summer 2007, we heard both President Berdimuhamedov and, especially, Foreign Minister Meredov intone sternly and repeatedly, "We will follow our own path!" Over time, we have come to understand that means, "We will do it our own way, at our own speed. Sometimes you will be welcome, if we perceive it's in our interests, but sometimes, maybe even often, not." We see this especially in our intense energy consultations. Over six months, we have watched Turkmenistan internalize a number of our key points, and we have seen some of their positions evolve in tentatively positive directions.

For example, Ashgabat now seems willing to consider cooperating with Baku on Caspian Sea energy infrastructure integration, even before the countries achieve bilateral delimitation of their maritime border. That's a welcome evolution that we fostered. But when the Turkmen think we are trying to push too hard, too fast, they dial the relationship way back without explanation, rather like a spiteful passive-aggressive spouse, and we are reduced to reading tea leaves while waiting weeks for appointments.

RUSSIA

¶7. (C) Russia is a paramount factor in Turkmenistan. During Niyazov's years, he kept Moscow at arms-length, more so than

ASHGABAT 00000363 003 OF 004

any other Central Asian leader, and there's no evident reason necessarily to believe the Turkmen have now decided to embrace Russia at the cost of other relationships. The Turkmen continue to trumpet their "permanent neutrality," which gives them cover for developing the kind of "multi-vector foreign policy" we see in other former Soviet republics. And yet from many sources we know Moscow has clearly proclaimed Central Asia as its exclusive sphere of influence, and the Kremlin has said it will take every possible measure to prevent a Trans-Caspian Pipeline. Further, we know the Kremlin never misses an opportunity, overt and covert, to warn the Central Asian leaders that the "real goal" of the United States is regime change, so-called color revolution, and the instability that can cause. The United States, according to this view, foments chaos so that we can steal natural resources and, ultimately, wound Mother Russia. We know Berdimuhamedov is hugely worried about social stability, and so he's especially susceptible to Russian black propaganda.

¶8. (C) We hear repeatedly, but indirectly, Turkmenistan is "under enormous pressure" from Russia. But we honestly don't know what Russia is doing in Turkmenistan. The Russian Embassy is an enigma; except for minimally polite social chit-chat, it will talk to us in only the hoariest zero-sum stereotypes. Some observers believe the Russian Ambassador in Ashgabat is like the British Governor-General of Hong Kong before it devolved to China. But we sincerely doubt he can simply stride in and give the Turkmen their marching orders. The real Russian influence in Turkmenistan is Kremlin Inc./Gazprom. Gazprom provides a significant portion of Turkmenistan's GDP, and Ashgabat cannot afford to risk that. Berdimuhamedov explicitly told Ambassador Steven Mann on February 28 (ref A), "Gazprom is our economic partner, not our friend." Berdimuhamedov is not about to annoy the goose that lays the golden egg until he is firmly convinced he has a few more goslings that might survive. Even if Turkmenistan isn't fully in Moscow's political corner, we have little doubt Russia has its brass knuckles on against the United States and will use any dirty trick it can gin up.

THE THINNEST OF THIN SKINS

¶9. (C) If we try to meld all these factors, we see that

Turkmenistan wants a relationship with the United States. It wants it intrinsically because the United States is a global power, but it also wants it to balance its other large-power relationships -- Russia, China, and to a lesser extent Iran and (Ashgabat's perception) the feckless EU. But Ashgabat wants -- and with brittle pride demands -- the United States on its own terms in this early moment of the new bilateral relationship because it truly knows little else to do. It does not have any appreciable experience in the larger world.

It's inexperience incubates its arrogance. And so, it bristles when we implicitly criticize -- e.g., Gazprom is a monopolist that is not in your best interests; you don't have to be Gazpromistan. Rather than discuss, or negotiate, or even say "no" to simple proposals, which would require self-confidence, it falls back on the annoying tactic of the silent treatment.

¶10. (C) There's yet one more factor that needs to come into the mix. Berdimuhamedov, thank God, is not ruthless like his predecessor. But neither is he probably the sharpest knife in the drawer. He was the consensus candidate of the Turkmen elite who were more than fed up with Niyazov and truly wanted to rejoin the world. Because Berdimuhamedov was the compromise candidate, he is enjoying a relatively extended honeymoon. But sooner or later, he will have to deliver. If he can't figure out how -- and his dysfunctional bureaucracy actually works against him -- he might fall back into totalitarian reaction, though we sincerely doubt he would

ASHGABAT 00000363 004 OF 004

ever be as bad as Niyazov.

A COUNTER-INTUITIVE PROPOSAL

¶11. (C) All of this argues for the realpolitik of engaging more fully with Berdimuhamedov -- without preconditions. We know he responds to "respect." If we are to move the bilateral relationship beyond its current business-as-usual, Berdimuhamedov, sooner rather than later, needs a visit to the United States. If we take this risk of showing respect at the highest level, he might respond more to our concerns. Turkmenistan matters strategically because it borders Iran and Afghanistan. Turkmenistan matters because of its near-world-class energy resources. Will we act in U.S. national interests?

HOAGLAND